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Book Says Hoover Tried to Cover Up Doubts About Soviet Defector

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The CIA strongly suspected that a Russian spy who defected in 1964 was a phony sent to cover up Lee Harvey Oswald's links to Soviet intelligence, according to a new book on the Kennedy assassin's life.

It claims the CIA's suspicions were effectively smothered by J. Edgar Hoover, who allegedly feared the Russian might disgrace the FBI by testifying that Oswald, in truth, had been an unwatched Soviet agent.

The allegations appear in Edward Jay Epstein's "Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald," which begins serialization in the March issue of Reader's Digest.

The Digest said Epstein, author of previous works critical of the Warren Commission's John F. Kennedy murder investigation, drew his new account from more than 10,000 pages of previously classified documents and 400 interviews with Oswald's acquaintances.

IN THE FIRST installment, Epstein says the Warren panel never questioned the purported defector — Yuri Ivanovich Nosenko — because it was under deadline pressure by the time the CIA advised it, secretly, that Nosenko might be hiding damaging information on Oswald.

Nosenko's name never appears in the Sept. 24, 1964, Warren Report.

Dealing with Oswald's period as a defector to Russia from 1959 to 1962, the report concludes: "There is no credible evidence that Oswald was an agent of the Soviet government."

According to Epstein, Nosenko defected to the CIA in Switzerland in January 1964, two months after Kennedy's assassination, and identified himself as the Soviet KGB intelligence officer who had handled Oswald's defector case file — Moscow's top expert on what the disgruntled ex-Marine radarman had done during his Russian sojourn and whether he fulfilled his boast to tell every military secret he knew.

The book says Nosenko stated immediately that the KGB ignored Oswald, never even interrogated him — a practice considered routine with any defector — and told him he should go home.

THIS INFORMATION, Epstein says, delighted Hoover, because it confirmed his assertion Oswald was a lone crank and not a Soviet spy who bore watching

But Epstein says CIA counterintelligence chief James Angleton doubted Nosenko's story from the outset.

"Both Angleton and the CIA's Soviet Russia division," he writes, "began independently to explore the possibility that the man called Nosenko was actually a Soviet agent dispatched by the KGB to pose as a defector. . . .

"And if Nosenko was not sincere, it suggested that the Soviet government was building a legend meant to deceive the Warren Commission about Oswald. But in what way?

"Neither Angleton nor the Soviet Russian Division believed that Oswald was acting under the control of Soviet intelligence when he assassinated President Kennedy. It seemed far more likely . . . that the relationship Nosenko was attempting to protect might be a prior connection Oswald had had with the KGB."

EPSTEIN ALLEGES that Hoover, on the other hand, advised the Warren Commission on March 1 that Nosenko was a genuine defector and his tale about Oswald seemed authoritative.

"As long as the public could be convinced that Oswald was a lone crackpot, uninvolved in any espionage . . . ," Epstein says, "the FBI wouldn't be held accountable for not keeping him under surveillance."

The book claims Hoover at first exerted exclusive FBI control over Nosenko and isolated him from CIA interrogators in America.

Later, he says, the CIA got Attorney General Robert Kennedy's personal approval to put Nosenko under high-pressure "hostile interrogation" in a barren CIA detention cell.

He allegedly made one contradictory statement after another but never admitted he was a KGB plant or that his Oswald story was a hoax.

Epstein said the CIA found especially incredible his claim that the KGB never even de-briefed Oswald in Moscow.

Oswald was a trained Marine radar air-traffic controller in the Pacific, who knew about the technical limitations of such military radar, about radio frequencies, codes and other matters.

BUT EPSTEIN SAYS his interviews with Oswald's old Marine Corps colleagues indicates he would have been irresistible to the Russians for a much more dramatic reason — they had all observed the operations of the then invincible U-2 spy plane at their top-security base in Atsugi, Japan.

At the time Oswald defected, the U-2s were still sweeping high over Russia wih impunity. The Soviets were still six months away from bagging Francis Gary Powers' plane.

"At Atsugi," Epstein says, "Oswald could have witnessed repeated takeoffs of . . . the still supersecret U-2, and, from visual, radar and radio observation, could have established its rate of climb, performance characteristics and cruising altitude."